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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 VIENNA 000548

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TAGS: [MARR](#) [PREL](#) [PARM](#) [PGOV](#) [AU](#)
SUBJECT: AUSTRIAN SECURITY POLICY: MINISTER
SUPPORTS/COMPELS STRATEGIC REORIENTATION

Classified By: Econ/Pol Counselor Dean Yap. Reasons: 1.4(b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) Driven by a desire to win domestic political standing and to keep Austria engaged in the development of European security structures (other than NATO proper), Austrian Defense Minister Norbert Darabos has both supported and compelled a re-orientation of his Ministry's mission, according to his senior foreign policy advisor. Overruling the general staff to support a ban on cluster munitions, re-staffing the senior military positions, and deploying Austrian troops to Chad in the face of undoubted public opposition were the first steps in this re-orientation. The coming months will see more visible "internationalization" of the Defense Ministry's orientation as the Ministry opens attache offices in North Africa and the Middle East, Darabos travels to Israel, and Europe's neutrals sit down together for discussions on their international role. However, Darabos faces significant resource constraints, remains anchored to the UN's legitimizing role for overseas missions, and continues to have a difficult relationship with the military itself. His use of the Ministry as a domestic political platform suggests limits to what might otherwise be seen as dynamic leadership. Darabos' initiatives may offer some scope for improved U.S.-Austrian military and security relations, but (as indicated by his support for a cluster munitions ban) may also create problems for the U.S. End Summary.

¶2. (C) In a wide-ranging and open conversation with Econ/Pol Counselor on April 17, Juergen Meindl, an Austrian diplomat seconded to the Ministry of Defense as Minister Darabos' foreign policy (and deputy political) advisor, described the Minister as pushing a strategic re-orientation of the Ministry. This reorientation starts from two premises, according to Meindl. One is that territorial military defense is not now relevant for Austria or western Europe. Thus, heavy and costly structures for territorial defense can be substantially reduced. Second, Austria should, in a multilateral context, be an active participant in European security structures and international missions. In a November 2007 speech to the Attache Corps, Darabos said, "the new orientation of Austrian security policy undoubtedly and above all means Europeanisation. As a middle-sized EU member state we have, in view of the changed security landscape, no alternative to putting our entire security structure in a European context." This thinking and the structural reforms were to a large extent already in the works -- to that extent much of Darabos' program fits in with and supports existing planning.

¶3. (C) Darabos, however, remains committed to neutrality (so no NATO membership and limits on security commitments within

the EU) and to the UN's role in legitimizing international military missions. In addition, Darabos has a strong personal commitment to a disarmament/arms control agenda, and has declared that arms control is among the Defense Ministry's core missions. Meindl also frankly admitted that some of the Minister's public activities also reflect the a desire to build his own profile vis-a-vis conservative Foreign Minister Plassnik and within the SPD. Meindl bragged that Darabos, previously among the least popular ministers, has jumped "16 percent in the last 10 days in public approbation. Given these defense policy premises and political and personal interests, Darabos has focused on a reorientation and concomitant restructuring of the Defense forces that would emphasize international engagement, with a priority in Africa and the Middle East, by specialized forces.

First Steps

13. (C) Minister Darabos, the first Defense Minister not to have served in the military (he performed civilian service rather than serve as a conscript soldier), had a notoriously difficult start in the Defense Ministry. In addition to still not entirely resolved issues related to the procurement of Eurofighters, Darabos had a difficult relationship with the Austrian military. Meindl openly acknowledged that Darabos had restructured the senior ranks with an eye towards strengthening the very small group of Social Democrat officers, but had neither wanted nor been able to create a purely social democratic senior command. This re-staffing is now complete and, Meindl maintained, has been accepted by the officer corps.

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14. (C) Darabos also confronted the general Staff on arms control -- revising over their opposition the Ministry's previous rejection of a total ban on cluster munitions. Darabos also expects the Ministry to take a more pro-arms control stance and more active role, especially with regard to conventional weapons control, in the future. In connection with the October 2007 cabinet decision to legislate a total ban on cluster munitions use by Austrian forces, Darabos declared "disarmament is a core element of Austrian security policy." Nonetheless, the decision is still a source of conflict within the Ministry, according to Col. Richard Monsberger, chief of the Arms Control Office in the Ministry's Military Policy Division.

15. (C) The most difficult of Darabos' initiatives, however, was his support for the deployment of 160 Austrian personnel to the EU mission in Chad. The immediate upside, however, was that the mission was strongly supported within the military and by the Social Democratic party. However, the up to 70% of Austrians who opposed the mission and, buoyed by a strong campaign against it in Austria's mass-circulation "Kronenzeitung," contributed to driving Darabos' poll standing into the cellar. However, the situation now appears to have turned around. Darabos, who traveled with 11 journalists according to Meindl, and the Chad mission received glowing media coverage during the Minister's April tour to Chad.

16. (C) Darabos also received positive coverage of his visit to New York and March 26 meeting with SecGen Ban Ki Moon. Meindl frankly acknowledged that this meeting was an intrusion into Foreign Minister Plassnik's turf and undertaken purely for the political benefits it would bring. And, together with the good news from Chad, it worked. Meindl claimed that polls have shown Darabos gaining 16 points in popularity polls in the last ten days.

Next Steps

¶7. (C) In his speech to the attaches Darabos to the opening of attache offices in the Near East and Africa (Algeria, Ankara, and Tel Aviv among them, according to Meindl) as one structural adaptation to the reorientation of Austrian security policy. Meindl reported that Darabos has focused on Africa and the Middle East as the two regions, in addition to the western Balkans, where Austria will focus future overseas engagement. The Minister plans to continue his high-profile travels with a visit to Israel in May. In Europe, Darabos will meet with the Defense Ministers of the other three neutral states (Finland, Sweden, and Ireland) to discuss their role in European security structures. Meindl was unclear on the exact content and goals of this meeting, which in post's view would certainly serve to burnish his credentials as a defender of Austria's neutrality.

¶8. (C) The most difficult challenge facing the Ministry is to acquire the resources and restructure the military to support an outward-oriented, lighter, and more professional military.

Meindl suggested that the planned reduction in Austrian forces to 55,000 would free up major financial resources -- he even pointed to the sale of some attache's residences as a source of funds -- but he acknowledged that even a smaller force, if equipped, trained, and deployed as Darabos envisages, would require more resources. Meindl also pointed to the top-heavy structure of the Austrian military, especially in the NCO corps, as a problem that will take more than a decade to resolve. He noted that the Ministry was starting re-training courses to try and encourage long-serving NCOs to move into civilian life, but was not optimistic given that the salary and security of an army job make civilian life relatively unattractive. Darabos, despite his personal biography, is also strongly committed to maintaining the conscription system. Furthermore, Austrian law now requires all troops serving outside the country to be non-conscript volunteers -- boosting the personnel costs of foreign deployments considerably. To reduce costs, Meindl said the Ministry intends to seek a change in the law that would oblige all members of the armed services to serve at last one overseas tour. This too will be a political challenge inside and outside the Ministry.

Limits to the New Orientation

¶9. (C) Given the timelines and resource restraints, however, Meindl was reluctant to suggest that the new direction would lead to an increase in Austrian deployments overseas. Looking at the Chad mission, he said the Minister's position is that

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the deployment should be ended in spring 2009, with a handover of the operation from the EU to a UN force. The Defense Ministry, Meindl argued, simply did not have the resources to sustain the operation any longer and the government, in pushing the deployment through parliament, had also said it would be limited to one year. Asked how Austria would respond if the UN were not prepared to take over the mission and another EU state was not ready to fill in for Austria, Meindl did acknowledge that Austria would not be able to simply walk away. Asked about possible further Austrian contributions to Afghanistan, Meindl demurred, and pointed to the Interior Ministry as better placed to provide the kinds of support now needed.

¶10. (C) Darabos' strong social democratic and Austrian neutralist perspective also impose limits, as does his strong support for conventional arms control measures. Monsberger explained, for example, that Austrian advocacy of a cluster munitions ban has created strains with Austria's EU partners and inter-operability problems. Klaus Becher, a German/British defense policy expert recently re-located to Vienna from IISS in London, has told us that Austria's persistent neutrality theme has rendered its thinking on the development of ESDP meaningless within the EU. If so, Darabos' consultations with other neutrals may be an effort

to coordinate their voices in ESDP to increase their influence.

Comment: Narrow Windows for U.S.-Austrian Cooperation, Perhaps

¶11. (C) Darabos' interest in Africa and the Middle East appear to open some windows for developing U.S.-Austria cooperation. Austria could conceivably be willing to work with AFRICOM on projects related to peacekeeping training for African forces, for example. In the near term, resource constraints and the incomplete restructuring of the defense forces may be the largest obstacles to such projects. More extensive cooperation in areas of core U.S. interest -- i.e., Afghanistan and Iraq -- is likely to be as hampered by political considerations as resource limits. End Comment.
Kilner